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Intervals // Cardinal

Caroline Beltz-Hosek
SUNY Geneseo

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Intervals

First Unitarian Church of Rochester, 1988

Before the sermon begins, I puke
blood in a cramped hallway & leave without

cleaning up the mess.
What grace—

Am I Eve? Biblical pariah,
my girl body disturbs me: pink

collection plate. Sweat gathers
in hairless armpits, oocytes stir yet

their travel will, for another twenty years, produce
only cyclical absence.

Nascent breasts under loose tops,
I learn my empty slough is something

to hide in bathroom stalls, feminine
pad expel, expelled to a backpack or purse.

I learn to exaggerate the pain when I want to
skip gym class. Like all the Raggedy Anns.

What does my teacher—without knowing—conceal
& predict when he quickly averts his eyes?

He gives me sweaty permission
to read alone in the nurse's office: thin membrane

curtain, foldaway clot, tart red
juice in a Styrofoam cup.

Mother of all my living, my living all
my mother, I was a chiasmus from the start

& go two months in utero until she's onto
me. Her ovum is my ovum is my twin

daughters, delicate split moon,
who do not yet know their bodies are ritual gardens

who do not yet know its clockwork catch & release,
who do not yet know God

is gone too soon from this place.
What wisdom is there in shedding?

Cardinal

*"Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
'And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.'" —Sylvia Plath*

My daughter dreams of dogs, saliva like glossy tripwire. As the pack circles her bed, showing teeth, she readies (red as the desire for red) her face for impact, menace of a fiction that feels real. She wakes & screams, eyes glissando from darkness to darkness, I come, I say: "In your house, in your bed, nothing can hurt you—

I have been avoiding this
poem. I don't want to be
pulled under the wheels of—

I want to write
about my daughter, who I think could live forever :: unscathed, smiling
if I can just love her enough,
remind her of everything that is:

Look—the thick
kisses of sunrise, the hushed way
someone dresses
for work.

not death,
not you.
Jo, my daughter, is
not you but she is

you

Joah: a simple, obscure Biblical name,
masculine, yet suicide is women's
work: trill of impact, your eyelet dress blooms rust
as the Amtrak "Cardinal" separates you & nothing &
can hurt you.

"What is the point of dreams, anyway?" Jo asks.
She holds me hard, arms soft hooks (*as if clinging could save us*), I kiss & kiss her
nightmare until it oxidizes clear:

red pink girl this—

Hush—cadence of dissolving.

It's all right, but (let's be clear) you should have lived, you lived with cousins who kept
you: clean & confident, Peter Pan collars *stiff as a board, light as a feather*. Your older
sister, Thea, was sent to (this feels like fiction) Aunt Icy Leona who spoke to her as if
she was already dead, who put my grandmother in charge of the household laundry, left
alone as long as the washboard & soap flakes did their work. Red-eye :: stain, release.

Midwestern Cinderella. A songbird with teeth.

Jo: diminutive of Josephine, feminine of Joseph.
She will add/give/increase. I named my daughter
after that outspoken March daughter, a novel
I loved when I thought I couldn't love anyone
more than my mother. We inherit this desire to take
life :: an affectionate mother, this—

the last
day of April. Red tulips rise
outside my window, the cling
of my :: death-breath, poem, (you & not you) girl
trills in the next room, softly
like feathers or fur, or lucid dreams,
or how you imagine
everything could have been.